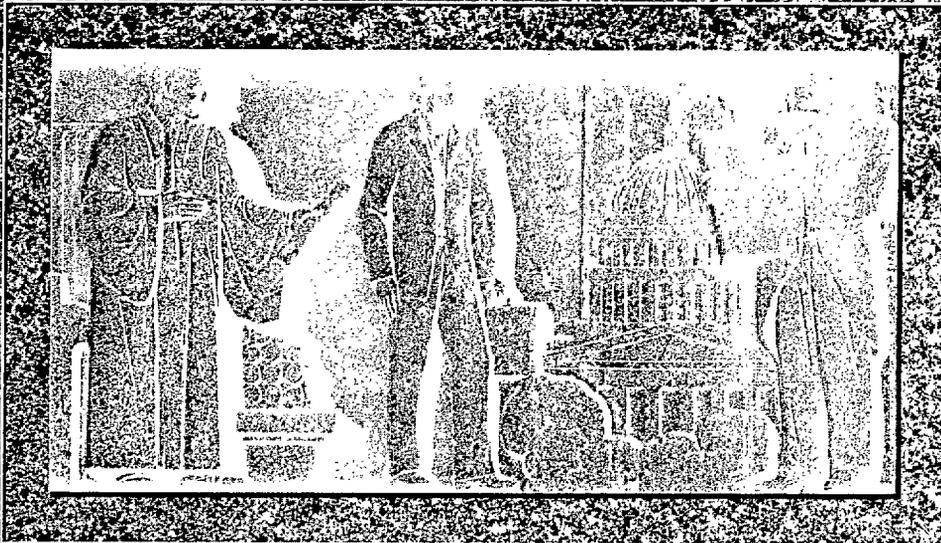
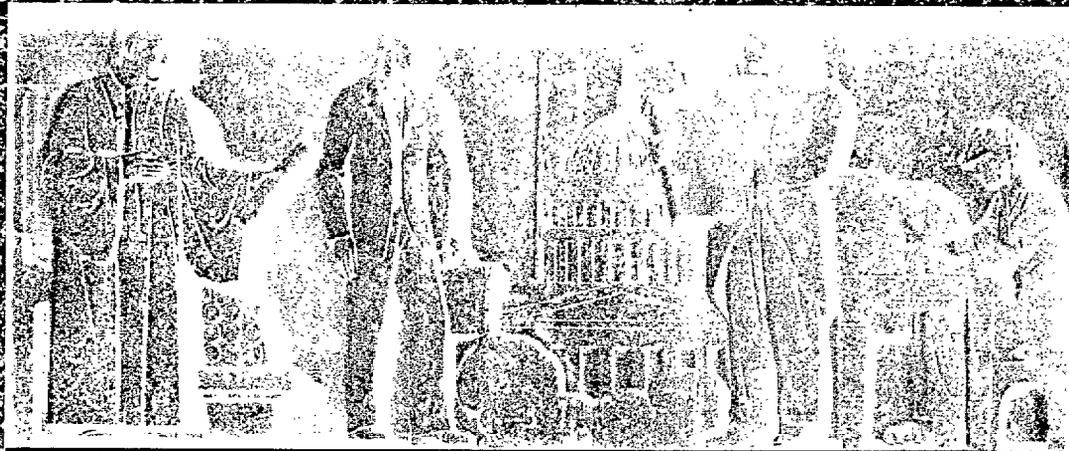


GAO

Serving the Congress



041379



The cover design highlights some of the figures carved near the G Street entrance of the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) in Washington, D.C. Created by Joseph Kizielewski in 1951, the frieze shows generalized representations of American men and women at work.

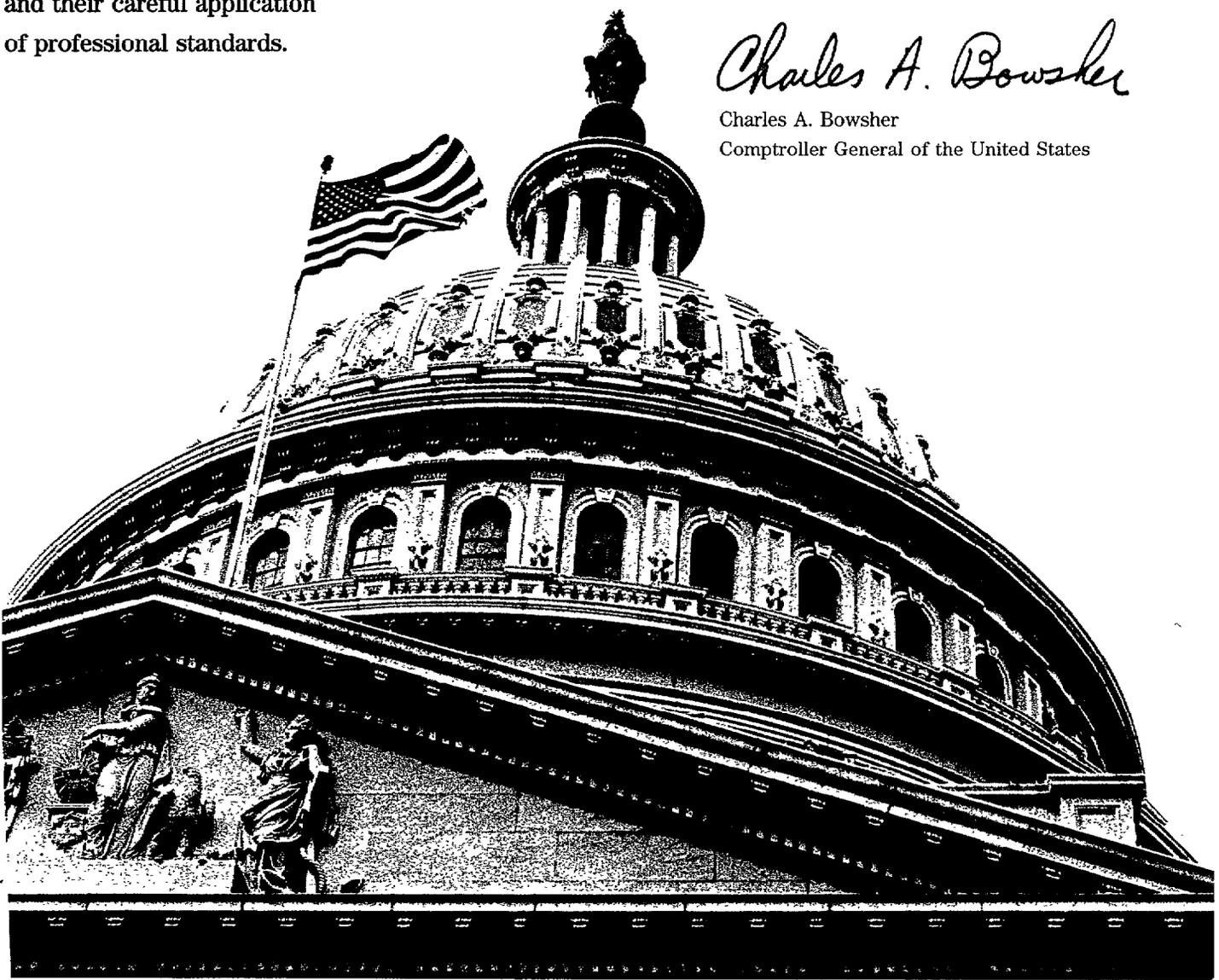
Preface

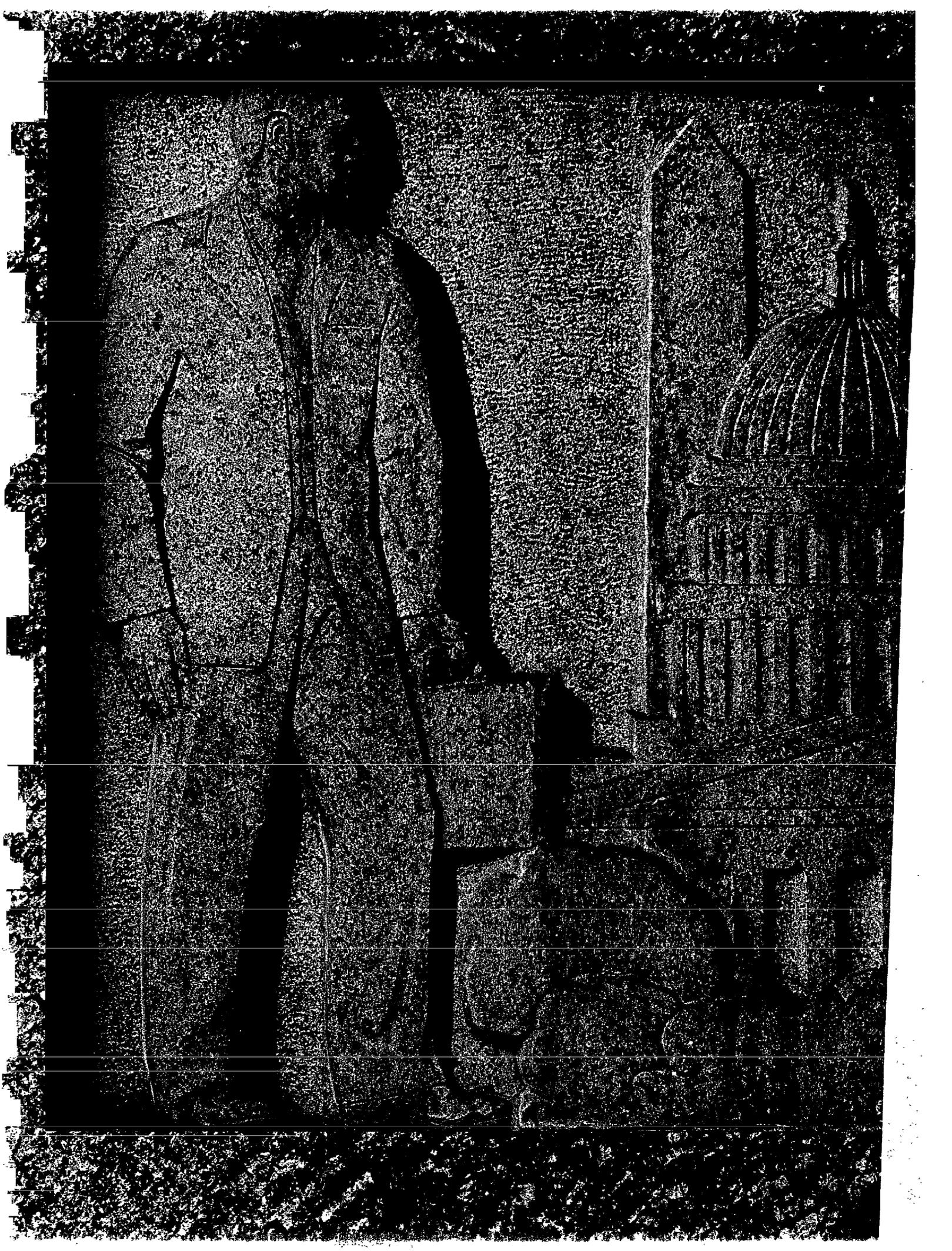
The ability of GAO to help the Congress improve government operations depends on the evidence obtained, the objectivity of our work, and the quality and timeliness of our reports. GAO's greatest strength lies in the competence, dedication, and enthusiasm of its staff; their ability to go wherever necessary to obtain needed information; and their careful application of professional standards.

The purpose of this booklet is to foster a better understanding of how we carry out our mission. It summarizes

- what GAO does,
- how GAO ensures the quality of its work,
- how GAO communicates the results of its work, and
- how to obtain GAO services.

Charles A. Bowsher
Charles A. Bowsher
Comptroller General of the United States





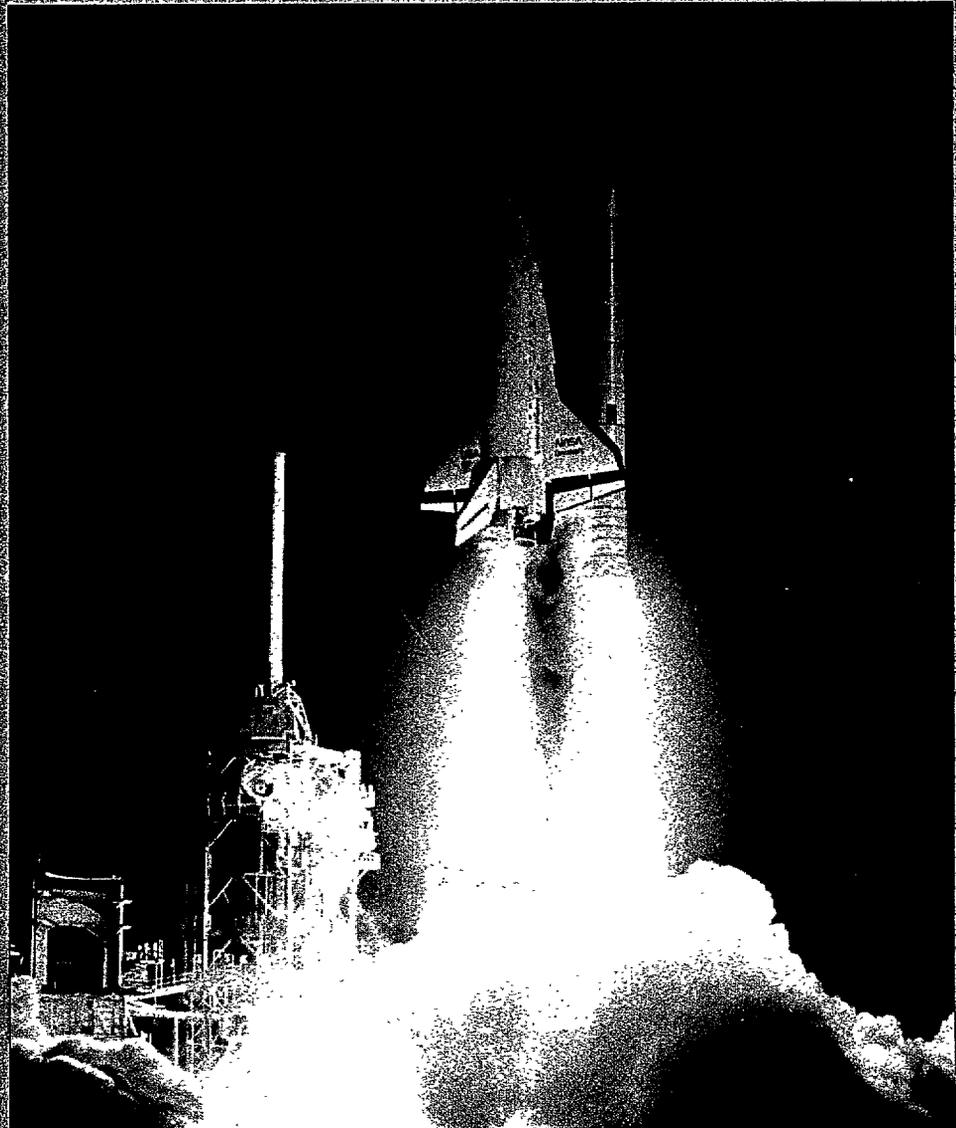
What GAO Does

Supporting the Congress is GAO's fundamental responsibility. We do this by providing a variety of services—the most prominent of which are audits and evaluations (reviews) of federal programs and activities. With the increasing demands by the Congress on our finite resources, it is critical in today's environment that the Congress have a thorough understanding of how GAO conducts reviews.

The inside back cover contains information on how to obtain GAO services.

Many GAO reviews are made in response to specific congressional requests. We are required to do work requested by committee chairmen and, as a matter of policy, we assign equal status to requests from ranking minority members. To the extent possible, GAO also responds to individual members' requests. Other reviews are initiated pursuant to standing commitments to congressional committees, and some reviews are specifically required by law. Finally, some reviews are independently undertaken in accordance with our basic legislative responsibilities.

GAO examines virtually every federal program, activity, and function. Coverage ranges from missiles to medicine, from inventory control to arms control, from outer space to inner city.





The U.S. General Accounting Office seal depicts the dome of the Capitol and the figure "Freedom" as representative of the independent judgment required of the Office, subject to oversight by the Congress. The stars represent the lineage of the Office to the Department of the Treasury, which performed some of our functions when there were only 13 states. The balance beam and scale represent the legal responsibilities of GAO while the ledger, quill, and key depict accounting and auditing functions.

Major Subject Areas

Accounting	Financial Management	International
Agriculture	Health	Intergovernmental
Defense	Housing	Military Services
Energy	Income Security	Taxes
Environment	Information Management	Transportation

Types of Questions GAO Answers

- Are government programs being carried out in compliance with applicable laws and regulations, and are data furnished to the Congress on these programs accurate?
- Do opportunities exist to eliminate waste and inefficient use of public funds?
- Are funds being spent legally, and is accounting for them accurate?
- Are programs achieving desired results, or are changes needed in government policies or management?
- Are there better ways of accomplishing the programs' objectives at lower costs?
- What emerging or key issues should the Congress consider?

Multidisciplined Staff Go Wherever Necessary

The ability to review practically any government function or program requires a multidisciplinary staff able to conduct assignments throughout the world.

GAO's staff have expertise in a variety of disciplines—accounting, law, public administration, the social and physical sciences, economics, and others.

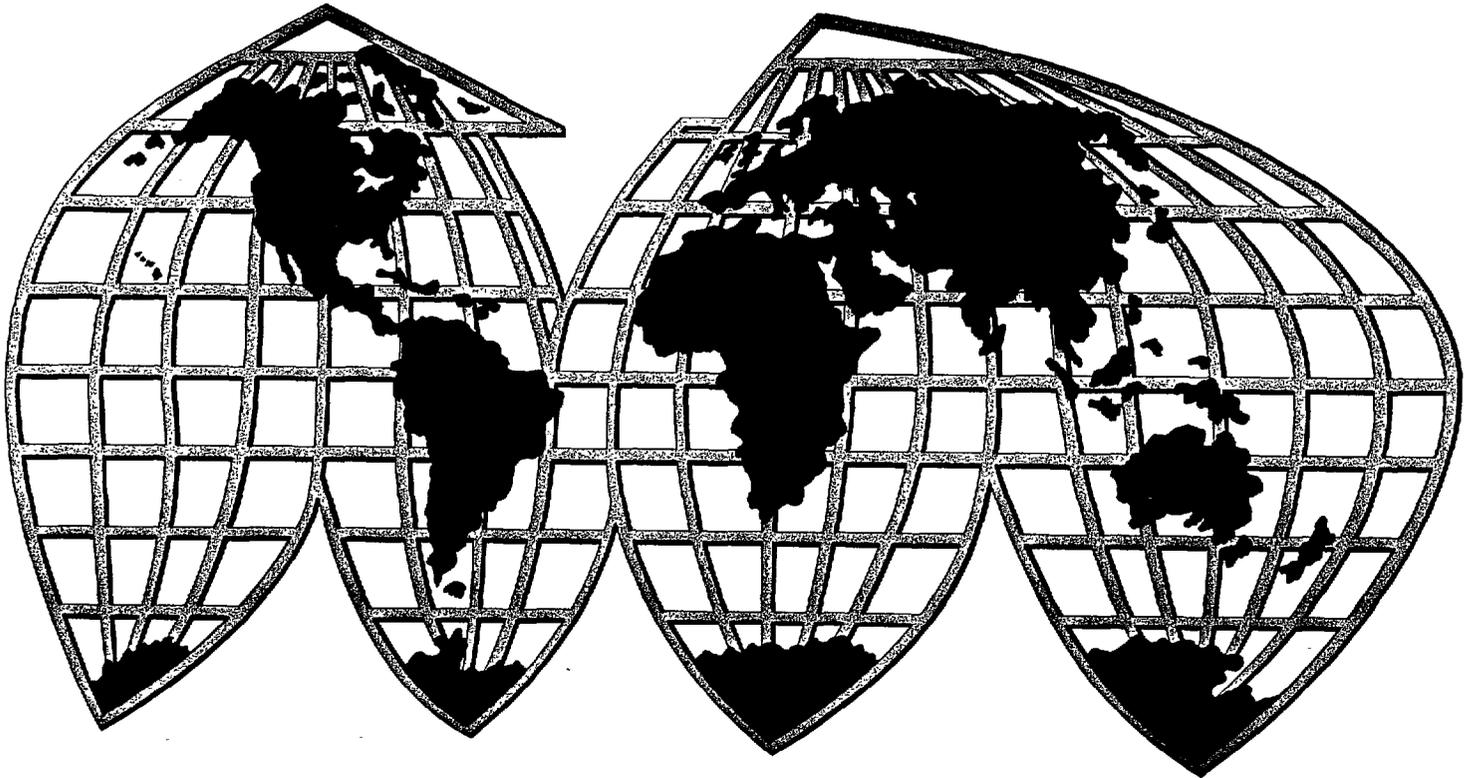
Nearly half of the staff have advanced degrees and about 10 percent of the staff have doctoral degrees. They keep up with current developments as members of professional societies, and many contribute to professional journals.



GAO is organized so that staff members concentrate on specific subject areas, enabling them to develop a detailed level of knowledge. (See "Major Areas of Work." A complete list is included on the back cover). When an assignment requires specialized experience unavailable within GAO, outside experts are called in to assist the permanent staff.

About one-half of our staff are located in regional and overseas

offices. On key assignments, they go wherever necessary, working on-site to gather data, test transactions, and observe firsthand how federal programs and activities are carried out. Our work generally takes us to locations in all 50 states and many foreign countries.





Ensuring Quality Work

Our goal is to meet the needs of the Congress by furnishing audit and evaluation services that are useful, objective, accurate, and available when needed. We pursue this goal through direct and frequent communication with congressional requesters and their staffs and by following rigorous professional standards.

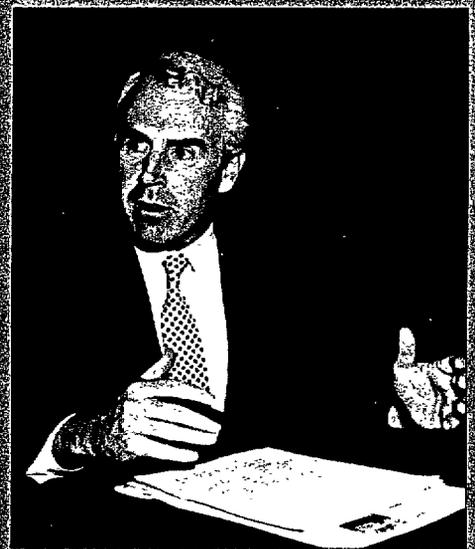
Assignment objectives. We work closely with requesters to ensure that our assignment objectives adequately address the requesters' concerns. We also help frame the request so that the assignment can be done in accordance with GAO standards. This enhances the credibility of the assignment and its usefulness to the requester.

Scope. We may propose alternative schedules and methods of doing a proposed assignment to ensure that we use our resources effectively in meeting the requester's needs.

Communication

Communication between GAO and Congress is important to our assignments. Communication is also essential to ensuring that our long-range plans focus on issues of greatest interest to the Congress.

Before starting a specific congressional request assignment, GAO staff generally meet with the requester to discuss the assignment's objectives, its feasibility, given the availability of staff, the extent or scope of the work needed, the date when work results are desired, and the type of final product that is most appropriate.



*Above:
Representative Fazio discusses the objective of his request.*

*Below:
Senators Humphrey, Symms, Warner, Simpson, and Breaux react to testimony.*





*GAO staff member
briefs Representative
Hamilton.*

Product type. We provide oral briefings, testimony, and written reports. Written reports vary in format and content depending on the complexity of the assignment.

If agreements reached during early discussions differ substantially from the original request, GAO often confirms changes in writing to ensure a mutual understanding about the assignment.

Sometimes, agreements need to be altered as an assignment progresses. For example, the requester's needs may change, the required data may be unavailable or unobtainable in the time allowed, or the methodology may need to be changed. In

these cases, GAO works with the requester to revise the assignment. Again, substantial changes from previous agreements are often confirmed in writing.

Early communication with the requester also is important because:

- Similar or duplicate requests may be received. We try to consolidate the assignments and provide copies of the report to each requester.
- An ongoing review may address (or may be revised to address) the requester's concerns. GAO works with the requester to ensure a satisfactory and prompt response.

• A recently completed review may adequately address the requester's concerns and make starting a new assignment unnecessary.

• GAO may not be the most appropriate agency to perform the assignment. In those cases, we will suggest referring the assignment to the Congressional Budget Office, the Congressional Research Service, or the Office of Technology Assessment (our sister legislative agencies); to the Inspector General of a particular agency; or to the agency itself. GAO remains available to help the requester if the information provided does not meet the requester's needs.

GAO strives to use its budget and staff resources effectively.

On occasion, the resources required by congressional requests exceed the supply of talent available within GAO.

Also, in some cases, the GAO staff most knowledgeable of a request's subject matter are engaged on other assignments and are not immediately available. In either case, we will do everything possible to respond to the new congressional request.

However, it may be necessary to delay starting some requests. In those cases, GAO seeks the requesters' help in setting priorities. Occasionally, GAO may be unable to respond to a request in a timely fashion and may ask that it be withdrawn.

In addition to communicating on specific assignments, we consult closely with the Congress in developing our long-range plans. These plans identify potential review areas. They focus resources on the most important national issues and ensure that GAO's work will be consistent with present and future congressional needs. Finished plans are discussed with, and available to, the Congress.

Professional Standards: Key to Reliable Products

GAO's commitment to quality means adhering to very demanding professional standards.



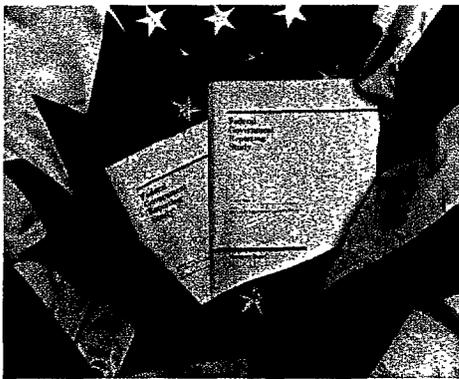
*Above:
Senator Glenn
responds to
testimony.*

*Below:
Senator Pryor
reacts to GAO
briefing.*





Comptroller General Bowsher and Canadian Auditor General Kenneth Dye discuss the development of government financial statements for the U.S. and Canada.



These standards require that staff be qualified and not subject to undue influences, that they carry out the assignment in a professional manner, and that the work be of sufficient depth to answer the assignment's objectives. The work must be soundly planned and supervised to ensure that sufficient, reliable, and competent evidence is developed. Reports based on this work must be timely, accurate, and objective and must present fairly the results of the work.

Over the years, GAO has been in the forefront in developing professional standards for audits and evaluations. GAO's prescribed standards are widely recognized and followed by federal, state, local, and many foreign government auditing organizations.

Two of the more important standards are independence and evidence.

Independence. Our goal is to provide useful and credible analyses and information to the Congress. To do this, it is important that we plan, perform, and

report the results of our work independently and objectively. Thus, GAO must have discretion in determining how and by whom the audit or evaluation work is to be performed as well as in deciding what is to be included in the report.

Evidence. During the review, we gather the evidence necessary to assess the issues in question. GAO collects, tests, and analyzes data to ensure that sufficient, competent, and relevant evidence supports the final product. Prior to completing an assignment, a senior GAO manager usually meets with responsible officials of the organization whose programs or activities are to be addressed in a report to discuss the facts developed and the implications that flow from them. Such discussions are important to ensure the correctness and completeness of the information to be reported.

Providing agencies and other adversely affected parties the opportunity to comment on a draft report can enhance the usefulness of the final report and provide added assurance that we are being as objective as

possible. Official comments are especially desirable when the issues involved are sensitive or controversial or when the report includes a recommendation for action by the agency head or the Congress that is particularly wide-ranging.

If requested, GAO will provide a copy of the draft to the requester at the time we send it to the agency for comment. If, due to urgency or other reasons, a requester asks GAO to issue a report without obtaining agency comments, we will generally comply but will note the circumstances in the final report.

The recipients of draft reports are advised that these reports are not final and are subject to change. Accordingly, recipients are cautioned to avoid releasing draft reports prematurely.

Before issuance, the final product and the evidence are independently reviewed within GAO to ensure that the evidence supports the report, the information is clearly and objectively presented, and any conclusions and recommendations are appropriate.

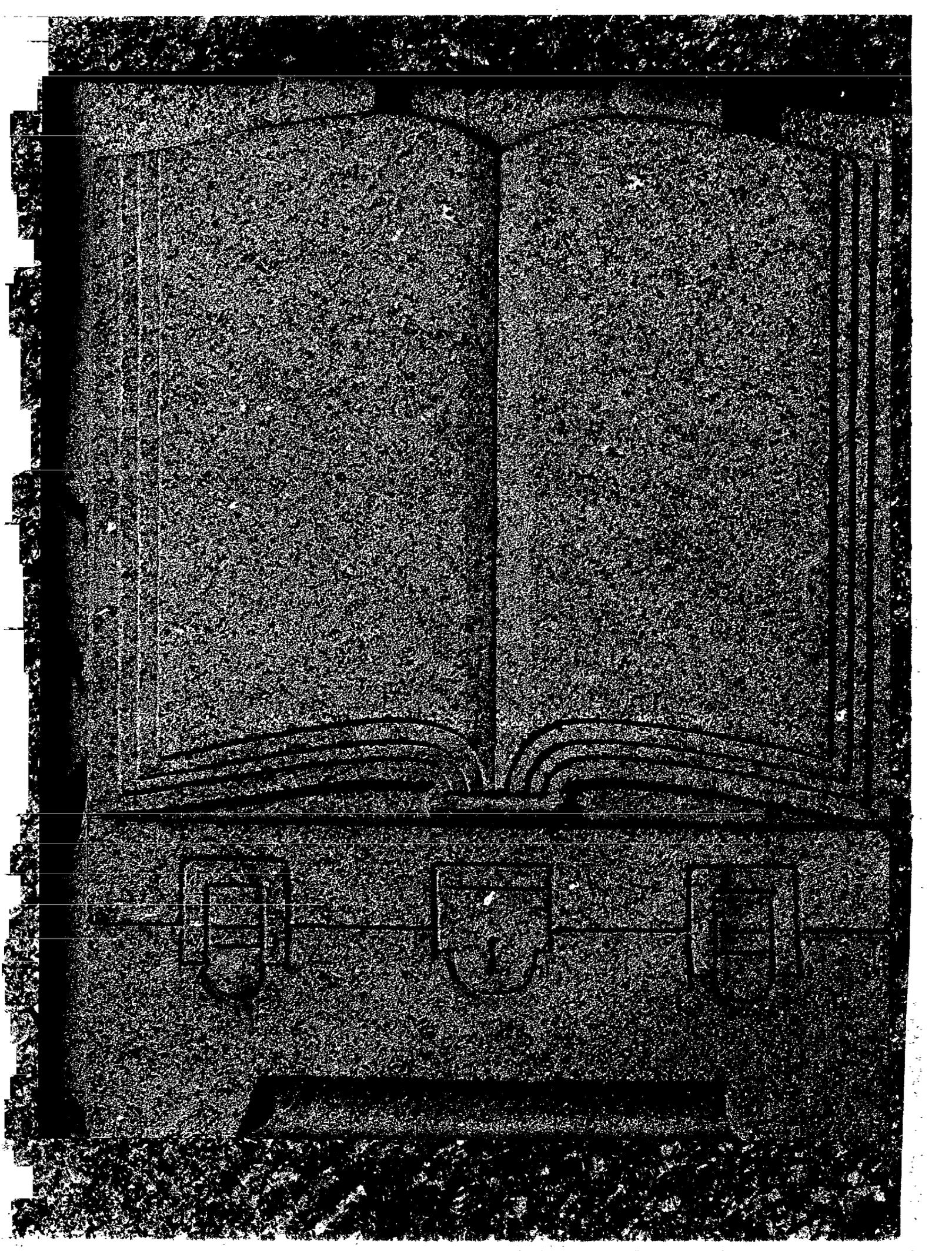
Additional data and evidence obtained during an assignment

may lead to a reassessment of prior evidence and/or GAO's tentative position. Therefore, GAO prefers not to release evidence until the assignment is complete and all data and evidence are thoroughly evaluated.

Providing Data Without Analysis

Sometimes requesters ask us to provide information or documents obtained from an executive agency without further review or analysis. GAO encourages requesters to obtain such information or documents directly.





Reporting Results

The effectiveness of our products derives from their quality and the way requesters and agency officials use them to improve government operations. GAO offers a range of products to communicate the results of its work. The type of product resulting from a particular assignment depends on the assignment's objectives and the requester's needs. In selecting a type of product, trade-offs may be necessary in scope, detail, or time.

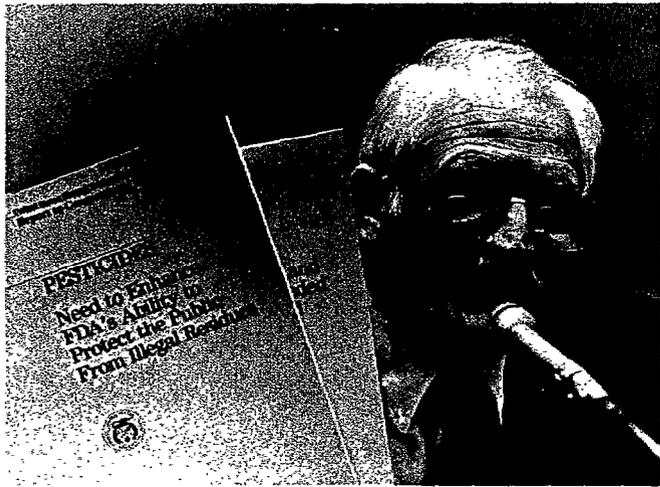
Product Types

Testimony. We testify frequently before congressional committees and subcommittees. The extent of detail we provide is tailored to the complexity of the subject, the time available for preparation, and the users' needs. Usually, testimony on work already completed can be provided on short notice.



Representatives Horton and Brooks react to GAO testimony.



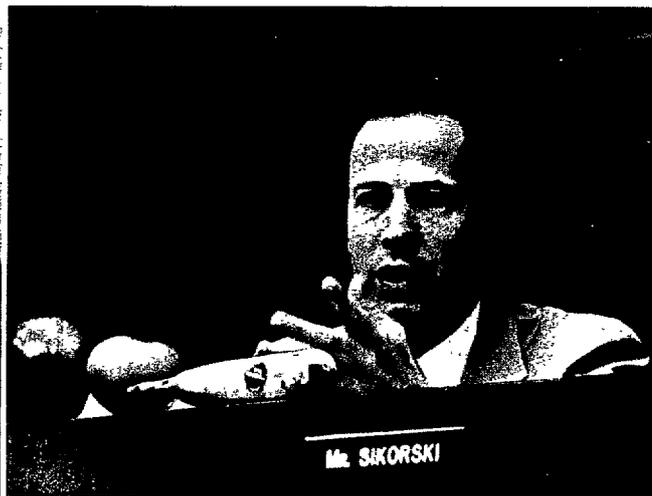
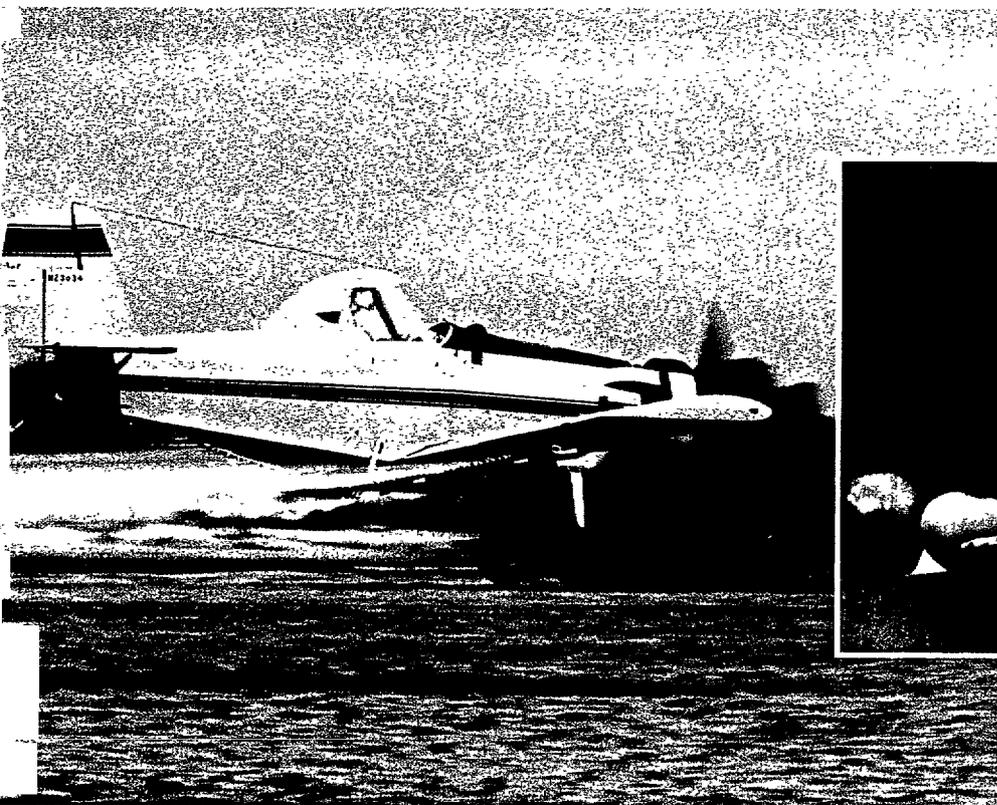


*Assistant
Comptroller General
Dexter Peach
testifies before
Representative
Sikorski on
pesticides
remaining on
fruits and
vegetables.*

Oral briefings. GAO encourages staff to keep requesters advised through periodic briefings during the course of a review. Because of the interim nature of briefings, requesters are cautioned that they are indicative of the status of our work at that time and the data should not be used prematurely.

Written reports. Our final written products vary in format, content, and complexity. They are addressed to the Congress, a requester, or an agency.

The reports range from a strict statement of the facts to a detailed analysis of the data obtained, including any conclusions and recommendations. Briefing reports and fact sheets can usually be prepared more quickly than detailed reports. Regardless of the reporting format selected, the work performed and the resulting products meet our quality tests. Moreover, any deviations from standards are carefully disclosed in the report.



Detailed report. Contains information on the background and operation of the program reviewed, as well as detailed data on the review results. These reports are usually based on broad-scoped assignments with agencywide applicability and, for the most part, contain conclusions and recommendations.

Briefing report. Formalizes information provided at a briefing. Briefing reports usually contain less background data than detailed reports. They usually offer conclusions and sometimes recommendations. Normally, briefing reports are used to provide the results of narrow-scoped

reviews or when urgency will not permit the time necessary to prepare a detailed report.

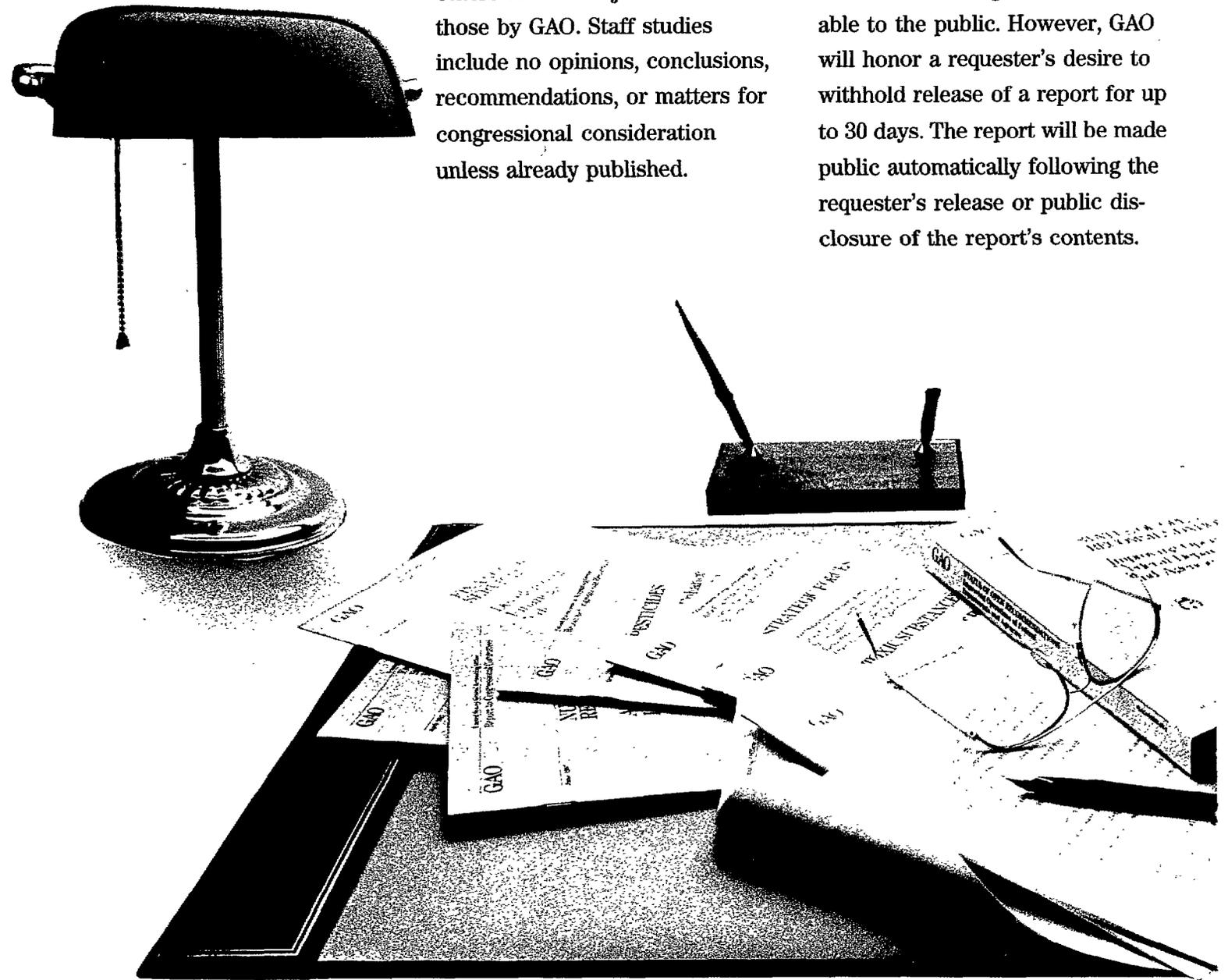
Fact sheet. States facts that answer specific questions. Fact sheets usually do not contain much background information and most frequently are limited to specific information and facts without conclusions.



Staff study. Summarizes information already available on a subject. Staff studies pull together key studies performed by others on the subject as well as those by GAO. Staff studies include no opinions, conclusions, recommendations, or matters for congressional consideration unless already published.

Our Products Made Public

All of our unclassified audit and evaluation reports are available to the public. However, GAO will honor a requester's desire to withhold release of a report for up to 30 days. The report will be made public automatically following the requester's release or public disclosure of the report's contents.



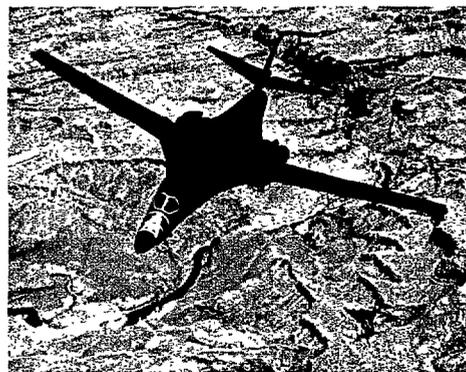
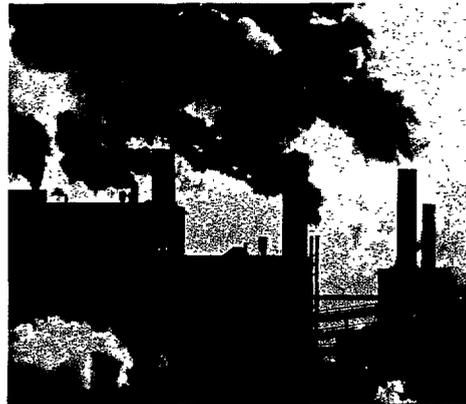
If GAO learns that other committees or members have a need for information in an unreleased report (such as for voting on pending legislation or hearings scheduled concerning the issues discussed), we will ask the initial requester to release the report to them. If the requester declines to release it, we will advise the other affected congressional parties of the report's existence.

Summary Reports

Throughout the year, GAO issues several summary reports about its work and activities. The Comptroller General's Annual Report, for instance, provides the Congress and the public an overview of GAO's activities in the preceding fiscal year. It highlights GAO's work on major national issues, summarizes our major issued reports, and identifies budgetary savings and better uses of funds resulting from GAO's work.

GAO also publishes a yearly report on recommendations that it has made but that, for various reasons, have not been adopted.

Monthly and yearly listings of issued reports are available so that the Congress and the public can obtain reports of particular interest to them.





Additional Services

In addition to its audits and evaluations, GAO offers a number of other services. They include establishing financial policies, conducting special investigations, providing legal assistance, helping to improve our profession, and working with congressional committees.

civil misconduct. The work of this unit typically involves conflicts of interest, questions of ethics, or procurement and contract fraud.

GAO is not a law enforcement agency. When warranted, it refers the results of its investigations to the Department of Justice and other law enforcement authorities.



*Above:
The GAO
Office of Special
Investigations
badge.*

*Below:
GAO evaluators
use modern
technology to
perform their
work.*

Accounting and Financial Management Policy

GAO helps ensure that the information Congress has available for its use is current, accurate, and complete. To do this, we prescribe accounting principles and standards for the executive branch. We also advise federal agencies on fiscal and other policies and procedures and prescribe standards for auditing government programs.



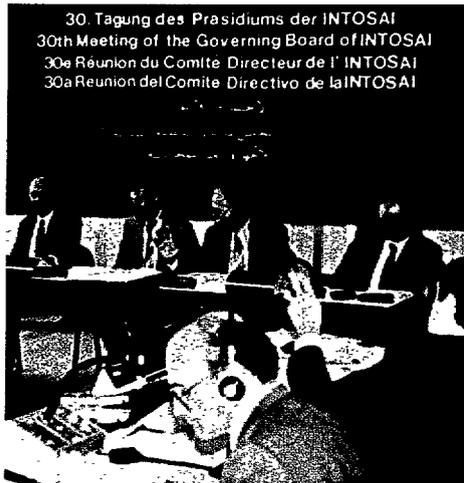
Special Investigations

In addition to its audit and evaluation capability, GAO has a staff of trained investigators. They conduct special investigations and assist auditors and evaluators who encounter possible criminal and



*Above:
The Special
Assistant to the
Comptroller General
and the General
Counsel do legal
research in GAO's
excellent law
library.*

*Below:
GAO supports
the International
Organization of
Supreme Audit
Institutions
(INTOSAI).*



Legal Services

GAO provides various legal services to the Congress. In response to inquiries from committees and members, the Comptroller General provides advice on legal issues involving government programs and activities. We are also available to assist in drafting legislation and reviewing legislative proposals before the Congress. In addition, we review and report to the Congress on proposed rescissions or deferrals of government funds.

Other services include resolving bid protests that challenge government contract awards, assisting government agencies in interpreting the laws governing the expenditure of public funds, and adjudicating claims for and against the government.

Audit/Evaluation Support

We also provide other services to help the audit and evaluation community improve and keep abreast of current developments. For example, we create, publish, and distribute papers on current audit and evaluation methodologies and approaches; we assist in various training programs sponsored by these audit/evaluation organizations; we encourage staff to participate in professional organizations; and we sponsor an international auditor fellowship program to help other nations develop effective audit/evaluation organizations.

Committee Support

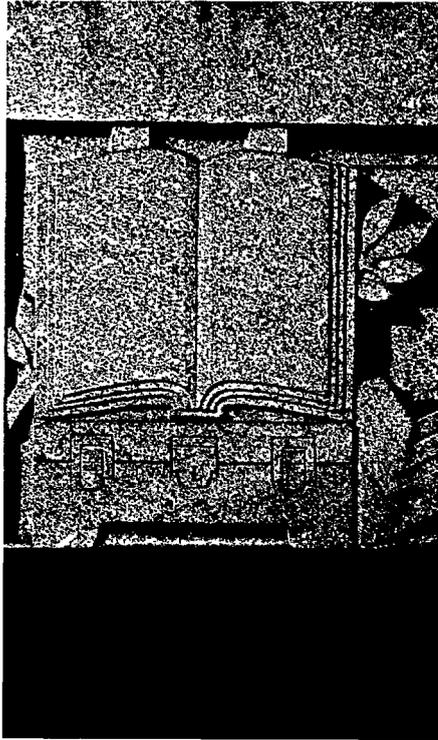
Occasionally, GAO assigns staff for no more than 1 year to work directly for congressional committees. In these cases, the staff assigned represent the committee and not GAO.

GAO

Obtaining GAO Services



Serving the Congress



Congressional requesters are encouraged to contact GAO on an informal basis prior to submitting a written request. GAO staff are available to consult with requesters or their staffs and help them frame questions and issues and formulate strategies and approaches even before a request letter is written.

We encourage the continuation of close working relationships between requesters or their staffs and GAO. Our Office of Congressional Relations (275-5388) can help requesters identify an appropriate GAO point for contact. To formally request GAO assistance, write to:

The Honorable Charles A. Bowsher
Comptroller General of the United States
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548



Organizational Units and Areas of Work



Program Divisions

General Government Division

Federal civilian work force	Civilian procurement and property management
Administration of justice	National productivity
Financial services and markets	Privacy
General management reviews	Claims
Tax policy and administration	

Human Resources Division

Health delivery and quality of care	Health financing
Income security	Intergovernmental relations
Education and employment	

National Security and International Affairs Division

Air Force	Army
Navy	Research, development, acquisition, and procurement
Logistics	Command, control, communications, and intelligence
Manpower and reserve affairs	Foreign economic assistance
International trade/commerce policy	
Security and international relations	

Resources, Community, and Economic Development Division

Food and agriculture	Science and technology policy
Energy	Transportation systems and policies
Housing and community development	Natural resources management
Environmental protection	

Accounting and Financial Management Division

Financial statement audits	Financial management standards and initiatives
Fraud prevention and audit oversight	
Internal control and financial management system audits	

Information Management and Technology Division

Computers and telecommunications

Program Evaluation and Methodology Division

Special program evaluations and development of evaluation methodology

Office of the Chief Economist

Office of the General Counsel

Office of Special Investigations



Technical Divisions



Other